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ABROAD AT HOME | Anthony Lewis ✓

Poisoning Ourselves

A hallmark of President Reagan's foreign policy has been an increasing reliance on covert operations. A name, the Reagan Doctrine, was coined for the idea that the United States should use any means to overthrow left-wing governments it does not like. The Administration set a massive example by financing and directing a terrorist war on Nicaragua.

Look around now, and you can see that the policy has had significant results. It has corrupted our own institutions: intelligence, the military, the White House. It has spread disdain for democracy and for law.

Nearly every day brings some new thread of illegality to light in this story of how the Reagan Administration armed the Nicaraguan contras. The latest discovery is a Swiss bank account set up in 1983 by a secret Army intelligence unit called "Yellow Fruit." It may have been used by Lieut. Col. Oliver North and Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, two of the principal figures in the Iran-contra affair, to buy arms for the contras.

Of course we still know only part of the story. The independent counsel, Lawrence E. Walsh, is looking into the operations to arm the contras. The Congressional committees will begin their hearings soon.

But there can be no doubt about the central fact: that the Reagan Administration supplied arms to the contras at a time when the law prohibited such aid. Administration officials ran that policy through a "private" network of former Government operatives like General Secord. It drew funds from many sources, including huge amounts from Saudi Arabia and Brunei.

Nor is there any doubt that it was President Reagan's policy. He called the contras the "moral equal of our Founding Fathers." He showed how little he thought of law as an obstacle to the attack on Nicaragua when he pulled the United States out of the World Court rather than accept its judgment that our war was illegal.

The other night, "Frontline," the superb Public Broadcasting documentary series, had a program about the war on Nicaragua. There were painful scenes of contra terrorism: infants killed by American guns. But the most shocking scene was of a 1983 White House press conference.

Twice, in answer to questions, President Reagan made a joke of the law that then barred military aid for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan Government. And the reporters laughed.

The Reagan Doctrine rests on the premise that the end justifies the means. That may be acceptable to the radical right-wingers who call them-

selves conservatives today, but it is not acceptable to traditional American conservatives or liberals. Two recent reflections on the Iran-contra affair made that clear. The first was by Christopher Layne, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*.

"Iran-contra happened because the Reagan Doctrine's backers were not willing to live with the outcome of the democratic process," Mr. Layne wrote. "It was not an aberration, it was a scandal waiting to happen. . . . Something as vital as the crusade against Communism was not to be hampered by such abstract notions as the popular will or constitutional propriety."

Prof. Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, saw Iran-contra as exemplifying a danger running through American policy of the postwar years. That is the lure of covert operations.

"The great attractiveness of covert operations for Presidents," Professor Hoffman said, "is of course freedom,

Corruption in covert operations.

— from the public, the press, Congress and most of the bureaucracy." The price of that "freedom" is loss of the restraints that the Constitution put on official power in order to preserve our democracy.

Voices on the right argue nowadays that we must give up some of our democratic character as a country in order to be an effective great power in the world. To the contrary, Professor Hoffmann correctly says, The record of covert operations is full of "disasters and fiascoes abroad, and the bad habits of illegality, deception and dishonesty they foster at home."

In a recent column on the deportation of Nazi concentration camp guards I wrote that Attorney General Meese tried to send Karl Linas to Panama instead of the Soviet Union. That may have given an unfair impression.

Mr. Meese did not initiate the Panama idea, I now believe. He took it up and explored it when Panama made the offer, because he had doubts about the Soviet legal system. When Panama withdrew, he went ahead with deportation to the Soviet Union because he was convinced, after reviewing the record, that the findings against Mr. Linas were correct. □